

POLISH LITERARY VOICES IN CANADA

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For years the North American continent has been the destination point, often fallibly regarded as the land of opportunities, for immigrants from all corners of the world. This phenomenon of forsaking one's country and heading towards the American continent may be analyzed with reference to different groups of people, coming from various walks of life and driven there by different motives. Undoubtedly, one of the most common on the list of possible reasons to leave one's native country is the struggle for a better material status. Another equally frequently quoted argument is directly related to the horror of wars waged on native territories, which is often interwoven with political oppressions. Among others, this 'exodus' to the North American continent has concerned the so-called intelligentsia (which seems a multi-layer term) which has also been represented by prose and poetry writers. The representatives of the latter group will be in the focus of attention in this paper. Also in their case, choosing an immigrant's fate might have been dictated by the above-mentioned factors.

The United States of America has become a new "harbor" (though this notion may raise quite disputable connotations and lead to heated discussions and polemics) for many prominent literary figures from Poland as well, such as Czesław Miłosz who chose the American soil as one of the most crucial points of his immigrant peregrinations. But the United States is not the only place where Polish writers have marked their presence on the North American continent. Canada, still relatively neglected in publications devoted to North American literature, has lured many outstanding Polish prose and poetry writers, the group of which is often dubbed as ethnic writers, or simply Polish-Canadian emigré writers. As both notions seem to be insufficient, and in the Canadian critical milieu there is a lack of consensus concerning the systematizing and naming of the Polish literary existence there, for the purpose of this short analysis of Polish emigré literature, I will resort to the term: Polish-Canadian literature.¹

Deliberations on Polish emigré literature as a foreign element on Canadian soil shall be initiated by a fairly general statement, which for specialists in this sphere of knowledge may sound like a truism, but it needs to be underlined here to introduce some systematization of the problem.

Polish writers in Canada belong to one of two groups, often referred to as the "old" and "young" immigration. Both of these notions lose their ambiguity, once we

¹ M. Pytasz, *Ethnic Canadian Writer* [in:] *Szkice o twórczości Wacława Iwaniuka*, I. Opacki (ed.), Uniwersytet Śląski, 1992, p. 99. The article presents three possible dimensions in which we can analyze the phenomenon of Polish literary existence in Canada treating it as: 1. immigrant poetry of the writers settled in Canada, 2. Polish-Canadian poetry, 3. ethnic-Canadian writing.

realize that within the first group we may list, as it is presented in publications trying to systematize the phenomenon, the writers who came to Canada after the Second World War. We may analyze this bearing in mind different reasons, starting with the most obvious and common one, that is the escape from the horror of war. These arrivals might have been observed right after the war, but they were noticed in greater number in the period of the 50's, 60's and 70's when the main reason of immigration was deeply rooted in the political situation of Poland struggling at those times against tyranny.

The term "young" immigration may refer to the ones who reached Canada in the 80's and 90's, still partly because of political reasons but also simply driven by an internal, personal will, not reinforced by any political circumstances.

There are definitely more examples of Polish emigré poetry created in Canada than those of Polish prose. Hence, in this paper the main stress is laid on this literary form. Probably there are a lot of examples of poets of Polish descent who live and create in Canada, but the reception of their works is either very narrow and limited to the circles of the Canadian Polonia, or these poets have never had aspirations of being in the limelight of the Canadian literary milieu. Thus, this outlining analysis does not concern them. Toronto and Vancouver have turned out to be the cities of Polish poets in Canada. The most conspicuous Polish poets lived and still dwell there.

Wacław Iwaniuk, Andrzej Busza, Bogdan Czaykowski, Florian Śmieja – these are the names most frequently quoted in Canadian critical circles. They all belong to the "old" immigration and have the luck of being recognized not only by Canadian literary Polonia, which in many cases is the sign of "non-existence" on foreign soil. Their poetry, presented very often in both English and Polish versions, is strongly related to the "past life," that is to the life they led before immigrating to Canada. No wonder that sentiment and nostalgia for the native country is often in the foreground of their writings. It seems to be the case that the life in a completely different reality, a multi-ethnic culture and, what is more, in a completely different language, among unfamiliar sounds, does not smoothen the assimilation process. Wacław Iwaniuk (1912–2001) is one of the most visible examples of the above-mentioned poets for whom the life in immigration proved an unbearable experience, additionally intensified by the horror of the Second World War. Iwaniuk participated in the war – first in France, serving with the Polish Mountain Brigade, then with the first Polish Armored Division in France, Belgium, Holland and Germany. Having been demobilized as a Lieutenant in 1948, he emigrated from England to Canada in the same year. Because of the fact that his immigrant works demonstrate most clearly the issue of alienation versus assimilation, this part of the paper will be devoted only to this poet.

Assimilation or feeling at home in the Canadian cultural "mosaic" was hardly possible for a person like Iwaniuk, who often used to confess that he constantly lived "with his face directed to the past," the past abundant in traumatic war experience. Though Canada offered a completely new life, far away from the scenes Iwaniuk was tormented by for all his life, it was probably never good enough to eliminate or at least reduce the grief continually troubling the poet. Fortunately, the country did not affect or paralyze Iwaniuk's literary performance. Although it is hard to dub him a poet who spread his wings and started publishing excessively in Can-

ada, he published his books of poems mostly in Polish, but also in English, there.² In 1995, in Toronto appeared *Wiersze uyrbrane* [*Selected Poems*, trans. J.B.], in 1998 *W ogrodzie mego ojca. Wiersze z lat 1993–1996* [*In My Father's Garden. Poems from 1993–1996*, trans. J.B.], and in 1999 *Stąd. Poemat*. [*From Here. The Poem*, trans. J.B.]. Apart from his own poems, Iwaniuk also contributed to translating into English, together with John R. Colombo, the poems of Ewa Lipska – *Such Times: Selected Poems* (Toronto 1981).³ He also translated into Polish the poems of many American and some Canadian writers which were later published in "Kultura" (a Paris monthly), "Wiadomości" (a London weekly), "Kontynenty" (a London monthly) and "Tematy" (a New York quarterly).⁴ Iwaniuk's translations of American and Canadian writers can not be omitted when discussing the reception of his works and literary activity in Canada. Undoubtedly, propagating American and Canadian works by means of translating them and, next, publishing in different places, has worked in favor of the reception of the poet.

Iwaniuk is also the author of the English version of selected poems written in the form of a personal diary, entitled *Evenings on Lake Ontario*. This confessional work, written in perfect English, is a testimony of Iwaniuk's reception of Canada and the life in immigration there. While discovering Canada with Iwaniuk's diary, it is hard not to notice that the author tried to evaluate the land (which he did not resist to inhabit or make his new and fully accepted home, rather than merely a place of residence) quite objectively, very often resorting to harsh comparisons with the European continent or even depicting Canada with a pinch of irony. One can still feel the sadness and longing for the past, but, at the same time, some kind of liking for Canada which probably never reached a critical point, but still proves that some kind of attachment to the country of immigration was developing. In his diary, Iwaniuk says:

My fascination with Canada has been long and stable.
The country is enormous but its brain is still growing.⁵

The recurrent theme – war – comes back in the next lines:

(...) The people Canadians are not as Canadian
as the Greeks are Greek.
We are all clients of the war.⁶

The dichotomy of alienation versus assimilation/feeling at home is a quite visible dilemma in the analyzed work. The poet seems to underline in many places, including the interviews conducted with him, that his bilingual poetry, poetry created

² As this paper is devoted only to the literary performance of the Polish poets living and creating in Canada, works published in different countries, for example the United Kingdom (London), are not discussed here.

³ B. Czaykowski, *Antologia poezji polskiej na obczyźnie*, Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza „Czytelnik”, Polski Fundusz Wydawniczy, Toruń 2002, pp. 587–588.

⁴ W. Iwaniuk, F. Śmieja, *Seven Polish-Canadian Poets*, Polish Canadian Publishing Fund, Toronto 1984, p. 44.

⁵ W. Iwaniuk, *Evenings on Lake Ontario*, Hounslow Press, Toronto 1981, p. 1.

⁶ The interpretation of these words should be definitely more comprehensive, for they may also refer to the multicultural structure of the Canadian society in more general and probably simplifying terms.

also in English, like *Evenings on Lake Ontario*, should not be treated as a proof of a gradual, but successful, process of assimilation. In one of his interviews, referring to the above-mentioned dichotomy, he emphasized that his "foreign language attempts do not prove anything." In this way, Iwaniuk partly answered the question about his assimilation/alienation in Canada, but also stressed that he should not be perceived as a bilingual writer.⁷

For such an individualist and erudite, a complete assimilation in Canada seems impossible for many different reasons. Iwaniuk writes:

We conversed about food and drink
But never about the Magna Carta,
The Napoleonic Code or Hammurabi's ancient Laws,
which remain, this side of the ocean,
complete mysteries.⁸

Cultural discrepancies might have been one of the main obstacles for the poet, preventing him from reaching a state of relative assimilation or finally feeling at home.

But there is undoubtedly one miraculous means to achieve a state at least close to the seemingly unattainable state of finding one's place as an immigrant in Canada – via breathtaking nature, so immense and ubiquitous. Iwaniuk's diary is in a way the record of his immigrant feelings, smoothed by Canadian nature for at least two different reasons.

One of them is quite obvious and concerns the healing powers of nature, and the other is rather pessimistic, as it undertakes the dilemma of alienation of man in nature's kingdom, but also in the realities of the 'Canadian kingdom.' This optimism and hidden joy concerning the existence of the omnipresent Canadian nature sometimes mingled with fear of loneliness, is expressed in many places of this confessional diary:

Between the city of Kenora and Port Arthur
the vast body of land and water is called
Quentico Park. Here I have found what I dreamed of,
Untouched nature in sheer beauty.⁹

In another part of the diary, Iwaniuk adds that in the Canadian landscape Lake Ontario is the only perfect communicator for him, as:

While in the city
I hear the Lake's voice
responding to my foreign tongue.
Yet the Lake is not foreign
it speaks all languages
and all are mine.
It speaks with understanding,
with affection,
with some sort of silent diplomacy

⁷ *Londyn–Toronto–Vancouver. Rozmowy z pisarzami emigracyjnymi*, A. Niewiadomski (ed.), Lublin 1993, p. 41.

⁸ W. Iwaniuk, *Evenings...*, p. 2.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

in its voice,
that we may communicate (...).¹⁰

Iwaniuk's reflections in *Evenings on Lake Ontario* are also addressed to Canadians or generally North Americans. The poet seems a very careful observer. His comments on North Americans are well-thought and definitely not superficial, since they resemble nothing like a simple description of the nation, but are raised to the level of more general, existential reasoning, such as for instance in poem no. 10:

Americans do not have the time to wait.
They are a fabulous people,
But not for our bleeding times.¹¹

Iwaniuk's immigrant testimony, especially the one created in Canada in English, appears to be the most tangible example of the poet's struggle to define his own place in immigration, to answer a question about being either a stranger on foreign soil or perhaps a person who has consciously commenced and set off on a journey, at the end of which his immigrant *self* could state – 'I am at home.' Summarizing his immigrant experience, Iwaniuk said:

(...) an immigrant lives in two overlapping spheres, which exist parallelly in a way. One could say that between the two bits of foreign soil which are briefly (and often unwillingly) acquainted, and the fragments of the lost native towns created out of the sentiments, there appear some similarities, but these two spheres are united by contradicting dependencies.¹² [trans. J.B.]

This statement needs no comment, especially since it has been additionally strengthened by another one, which Edward Zyman (who belongs to the "young" generation of immigrants) introduced as a motto to one of his poems, entitled *Moje życie jest snem* [*My Life is a Dream*, trans. J.B.]:

When I sleep I am in my homeland
When I wake up
I am in immigration.¹³ [trans. J.B.]

As it was underlined before, this general analysis, in the part concerning the "old" immigration, focuses only on Waław Iwaniuk's works, thus the poetry of Andrzej Busza, Florian Śmieja and Bogdan Czaykowski, literary figures also well-recognized in the Canadian critical milieu as writers creating in English and in Polish, is omitted here. It must be, however, stated that they definitely deserve a separate paper in which, apart from an analysis presented through a contrastive prism on the subject of the Canada of Waław Iwaniuk and Canada of Śmieja, Busza and Czaykowski, a comprehensive study of the group called poets of the *Continents* [Grupa poetycka *Kontynenty*], to which all of them belonged, should be included.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 20.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 13.

¹² W. Ligeza, *Miasta podwójne* [in:] *Jerozolima i Babilon. Miasta poetów emigracyjnych*, Kraków 1998, p. 173.

¹³ E. Zyman, *Moje życie jest snem*, "Akcent," no. 3(89), 2002, p. 127.

Within the "young" generation of literary immigrants, the following writers shall be listed: Edward Zyman, Aleksander Rybczyński and Krzysztof Kasprzyk.

As it was mentioned before, the representatives of this group left Poland mainly at the beginning of the 80's and either directly moved to Canada or chose Canada as the last (so far) point in their immigrant journey (which was the case of Aleksander Rybczyński).

Bearing in mind that the character of their immigration was completely different from that of the "old" immigration of poets, one should not look for war references in their poetry.

One indisputable similarity (the element which probably appears in most immigrant literary works) is the outlook on the life in immigration and the attempt to find one's place in Canada.

The dichotomy of assimilation and alienation, mingled with a feeling of longing for the native country, is probably most visible in Rybczyński's and Zyman's poetry, whereas Kasprzyk's works, presented in the form of poetry, but also in the form of short essays where the author undertakes the analyzed problem, do not appear to be as nostalgic as the poems of the two other authors. Kasprzyk certainly belongs to the group of immigrants who managed to find their place in the new reality and escape from qualms of conscience or sadness caused by the feeling of existing permanently between two worlds – the Polish and the Canadian one. This state of living "in-between" is not familiar to him. Mostly, in his essays he emphasizes, without any sign of hesitation, that in Canada he enjoys all the charms of freedom and feels at home in the Canadian cultural "mosaic:"

I feel good in this multicultural country because the things I read about or what I studied in Poland about other countries, are expressed here in daily encounters with citizens of these countries who, just like me, try to find their place here.¹⁴ [trans. J.B.]

Kasprzyk writes that life in Canada has taught him a certain distance to himself but foremost to Polish current affairs.¹⁵ His immigrant diary, if he were to write one, would probably be abundant in advantages and splendors which stem from the immigrant experience, rather than in the misery that he experienced on the foreign soil. For Kasprzyk, Canada is a land of opportunities, a land where one can lead a good life and, if he wishes, be exposed to refined cultural life.

Two other poets, Zyman and Rybczyński, do not share Kasprzyk's experience. Nostalgic tones, as well as tones conveying sadness or the feeling of loneliness, though not as intensified as in Iwaniuk's *Evenings on Lake Ontario*, linger in their poems.

In his poem *Nadzieja; sprzed lat* [*Hope; From Years Ago*, trans. J.B.], Zyman writes:

¹⁴ K. Kasprzyk, *Poza Polską, poza pisaniem...*, "Fraza," no. 2, 2004, p. 60.

¹⁵ The meaning of "immigrant distance" was once discussed by Andrzej Busza during one of his lectures delivered in Cracow on November 24, 2004. Busza understands the phenomenon of distance through the prism of language, namely the English language. The poet says that his works created in Canada are written at a certain distance, but only if they are in their English version, for this is the language which gives him a secure distance whenever he writes about Poland. This intriguing observation is probably possible mainly in the case of bilingual immigrant writers like Andrzej Busza.

(...) The continent which approaches us
lures us with its magic eye of adventure,
multiplying numerous question marks.¹⁶ [trans. J.B.]

The new land was tempting, but at the same time, as Zyman underlines in another poem, *Z każdym dniem* [*With Every Day*, trans. J.B.], still foreign and not familiarized enough:

We are always strangers
Still here
There already absent.¹⁷ [trans. J.B.]

In the same poem, grief and nostalgia are also depicted quite clearly in the language of metaphors, such as: "my immigrant kingdom," "the home Republic of Poland." The analysis of Zyman's other poems leads to the conclusion that there exist mutual feelings regarding the immigrant fate shared by Zyman and Iwaniuk. Iwaniuk's life on the edge between now and then, here and there, is also reflected in Zyman's Canadian experience.

The poet writes in the poem *Język* [*Language*, trans. J.B.]:

They teach me
Here
Many new
Tenses
And I
Know
That there exists
Only
The Past
Tense.¹⁸ [trans. J.B.]

The "past tense" resembles Iwaniuk's "face still directed to the past." These two intermingling layers – past-present, Canadian-Polish – as Zyman writes, are separated by the callous Atlantic.¹⁹

Rybczyński's poems surprise with their delicate tones which also touch the sphere of his assimilation in Canada. Jan Wolski, in his article devoted to the poetry of Aleksander Rybczyński,²⁰ claims that Rybczyński's encounters with Canada and his way of making it more familiar, less foreign, should be divided into three stages. He initiates his immigrant adventure by means of language, trying to name the new reality, which is the beginning of a dialogue with the new territory. From this stage, the poet moves to the next one which involves familiarizing the country, and finally, quite unexpectedly, there comes the time for rescuing the past from forgetting, which sums up his immigrant journey but at the same time implies that, no matter

¹⁶ E. Zyman, *Nadzieja; sprzed lat*, "Akcent," no. 3(89), 2002, p. 124.

¹⁷ E. Zyman, *Z każdym dniem*, "Akcent," no. 3(89), 2002, p. 125, the poem was dedicated to Waław Iwaniuk.

¹⁸ E. Zyman, *Język*, "Akcent," no. 3 (89), 2002, p. 126.

¹⁹ See the poem by E. Zyman, *Co my tutaj robimy?*, "Akcent," no. 3 (89), 2002, p. 127.

²⁰ J. Wolski, *Czułość, zachwyt, wyobrażenia i tajemnica*, "Akcent," no. 3 (89), 2002, pp. 92–

how deeply rooted one may be in the foreign soil, the *imponderabilia* from the past can not vanish under the weight of the new.

Though almost every single poet discussed in this paper feels an immigrant's pain, none of them was able to separate himself definitely from the new life he decided to accept.

Comparing the immigrant experience of the "old" generation of writers to that of the "young" generation is not possible in many cases for, as I have stated, there exist serious discrepancies between their motives to leave the native country. Despite all the discomforts the presented poets might have experienced, in their works and interviews they do not depict Canada as a hostile country, but rather as a country which amazes one with its nature, serving sometimes as a catalyst for their immigrant sorrows and griefs.

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